Blessed Paul Heath

The son of a Protestant family, Henry Heath was born at Peterborough, Northamptonshire, England, in 1599. Endowed with unusual gifts of the mind, he was sent at eighteen to the University of Cambridge; and four years later he received the degree of bachelor of arts and was placed in charge of the university library. Because of religious misgivings, which became graver as he advanced in his studies, Henry began to investigate the teaching of the Catholic Church. He soon saw how utterly untenable Protestantism was on logical and historical grounds and decided to embrace the old faith. Leaving Cambridge secretly, he went to a Catholic nobleman in London; but, at first, he was taken for a spy. After seeking the aid of the Blessed Virgin, however, he was well received and introduced to a priest, who admitted him into the Church. The young convert then left England and went to the English College at Douai.

Meeting the sons of St Francis at Douai, Blessed Paul Heath was filled with the desire of joining their ranks, but was discouraged by his confessor. Once more he implored the help of the Blessed Virgin; and in May, 1624, he was clothed with the Franciscan habit and received the name of Friar Paul of St Magdalene. Four years later he was ordained a priest. Father Paul was highly esteemed for his virtue as well as his learning. He held the important offices of professor of moral and later dogmatic theology, spiritual director of the student clerics, vicar, and then guardian. At the same time Blessed Paul Heath devoted himself to the care of souls, making sinners and heretics the special object of his priestly zeal. Many conversions were brought about through the prayers and labors of Father Paul. Father Peter Marchant, who presided at the chapter of 1637, described Father Paul as "a mirror of meekness, integrity, and sincerity, a beacon light of holiness, a model of religious observance among the brethren, and in the science of theology a shining and glowing star among the luminaries of the Douai University."

From the beginning of his conversion Father Paul distinguished himself by his devotion to Our Lady. Through his father had remained a bitter Protestant, Father Paul begged the Blessed Mother to lead him into the fold of the Church, and a most remarkable conversion followed. The eighty-year-old man crossed the sea to hunt up his son at Douai; and not only did he make his peace with the old faith, but he joined the Franciscans there as a lay brother.

In 1641 the Puritan persecution of the Catholics in England broke out. It was directed particularly against priests. Five Franciscans won the martyr's crown, and Father Paul was the third among these. In December, 1642, Blessed Paul Heath left Douai for Dunkirk. There he had a sailor's suit made out of his habit, and crossed the channel to Dover. On the way to London, he was apprehended. After admitting that he was a priest and making a fearless profession of faith, he was thrown into Newgate prison. There he devoted much time to the spiritual comfort of his fellow prisoners and of the many Catholics who came to visit him.

Several months Blessed Paul Heath spent in prison, and in April he was condemned to be executed at Tyburn. When the final preparations were made for his hanging, Father Paul again and again invoked the names of Jesus and Mary. His last words were:

"O Jesus forgive me my sins! Jesus, convert England! Jesus, have mercy on this country! O England, be converted to the Lord thy God!"

Blessed Paul Heath died a martyr's death on April 27, 1643. At the moment of his death, the aged lay brother at Douai, who was his father, saw a brilliant light ascending into heaven and told his brethren that his son had just then died for the faith.